

Moving from good to great

Taking a long perspective on school improvement, **David Crossley** offers the first of a series of articles on how schools can move from good to great and the system as a whole might raise high standards further still

Our schools have never been better. More young people are achieving more, whether it is in terms of GCSEs, A-levels, staying-on rates, the number taking degrees or more qualitative indicators. Here are some of the key facts.

- In 1988, only 25 per cent of pupils were awarded a qualification at age 16 that was valued. In 2009, 70 per cent of pupils gained A*-C grades at GCSE, 50 per cent including English and maths.
- In 1988, fewer than 10 per cent of pupils were staying on post-16 and progress to university was only 3 to 5 per cent. In 2008, more than half stayed on post-16 and in 2010 the new A* at A-level challenged the critics of 'dumbing down' in terms of subjects taken and of outcomes achieved.
- In 2000 there were 600 out of 3,000 secondary schools where fewer than 25 per cent of pupils attained five A*-C grades at GCSE. By 2006 there were fewer than 40. The figure for 5A*-C including English and maths has fallen from 600 in autumn 2007 to around 200 in summer 2010.
- There has been a revolution in the availability of technology in schools and classrooms.

At the recent conference of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the Education Secretary Michael Gove described our schools system as good with outstanding features. In world terms it is – but it is not how our schools system is often portrayed. Of course there is more to do, but if we are to enable and empower schools to take their next steps forward we must recognise where the system is now in global terms and learn the lessons of what the system needs to focus on if it is to become not just a good system but one of the world's best.





Figure 1: Ways to move from good to great

Figure 1 above introduces some of the key lessons we can learn. We expand on these below.

1. Be positive and build from where schools are

The first lesson is about staying true to key principles, and the most important one of all is our collective moral purpose of enabling every young person to achieve their potential. Nobody came into teaching to help students do worse at school, yet the profession can often feel that it is being treated as if it did. Be positive and build from where schools are and we will be surprised by the results.

2. Schools can do anything but not everything

The second lesson seeks to address the problem that we can't keep adding to what schools do already. We need to make sure less can be more. Any school can do anything but not everything. Therefore in our work we are putting much greater focus on the hows rather than the whats – and particularly on the notions of abandonment and deployment of our current resources.

3. Focus on sustainability rather than just quick fixes

The third lesson is to focus on sustainability rather than just quick fixes. This is a 'both... and' endeavour involving, in Andy Hargreaves' words (2009), "harmonizing, sequencing and integrating the short, medium and longer term strategies at the same time". To put it simply, if you just focus on year 11 and on borderline C grades it will always seem to be all that you need to do. If you want to break out of being locked into the urgent rather than the important, then a greater focus is needed simultaneously on what is happening in years 7 to 11 as a whole if a real and sustainable difference is to be made.

4. Focus on raising the ceiling as well as the floor

The fourth lesson is to shift our focus, at least in part, from just raising the floor – to focus, empower and liberate the system to raise the ceiling too. In a fast changing worked today's innovative practice tends to become tomorrow's norm. Nowhere is this truer than in terms of new technologies, but we face a real problem here. As the late Douglas Adams said: "Anything that exists in the world before you are born is part of the normal way in which the world operates. Anything invented while you're between the ages of 15 and 35 is revolutionary – and quite possibly something you can get a career out of. Anything invented after the age of 35 is against the natural order of things."

This issue dogs our educational system, because what's known best by those who lead the system from the top is inevitably from a different age. Again, to put it simply, contrast how and when students learn mathematics with how we view television and find out the news. Why are schools almost the last places where we do almost everything at set times and in set places?

5. Create a positive culture

The final lesson is about creating a positive culture, because if we do all do this then all else is possible. And the best way to do this is to combine it with alignment around a core moral purpose and belief in our young people. As Canadian educator Ben Levin (2009) remarked: "The reality is that in learning we do not know what the boundaries of human capability are – what we do know is that barriers that seem impossible are eventually broken and performance gets better."



Thinking globally

Our education system is now quite rightly judged in global terms. So what can we learn from school systems in other countries? Published in 2007, the first McKinsey report *How the World's Best Systems Come Out on Top* said something that in many ways is obvious: you can have the best curriculum, best infrastructure and best policies but if you don't have the best people...

This leads to an important focus on attracting the best people into teaching and retaining them – but in many ways it also leads to an unrealistic expectation that every teacher can somehow be outstanding and be outstanding all the time. I worry about this. We have always had and always will have a proportion of outstanding teachers but they are hard to replicate.

Most outstanding schools are consistently good and it is that consistency that makes the difference. Tremendous focus is given to schools that are deemed as failing but there is relatively little focus on or investment in what they need to do next.

There are more underperforming students in the generality of schools than in failing schools. Yet it is a statistical truism that there are most underperforming students in the generality of schools than in failing schools. In Ofsted terms, at a national level, the real battle is in moving schools from satisfactory to good – and this changes the experience of far more young people in more lessons. But policy and resources are not really invested in this area. Tremendous focus is given to schools that are deemed to be failing but there is relatively little focus on what they need to do next.

However, moving teaching from satisfactory to good is something you can learn how to do. This is aligned with all the research on competences – as an individual there are things that you are best at and things that you are weakest at and there is little any individual can do to change those things easily. That is why we work in teams. But consider all the competences and degrees of effectiveness in the middle range, where there is the most capacity to improve at both

an individual and school level. In terms of teaching and learning there is broad agreement about what makes a good lesson, and the difference between a good and a satisfactory lesson involves doing things we can learn at individual level and things an organisation can support. This builds confidence in individual teachers and schools and is likely to enable the teacher and school to build on what they are good at and then become great at.

Context determines how you do things, not what you do. The second McKinsey report, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (2010), has in many ways more to offer to our system if it is to move forward successfully. Researchers studied 22 different systems around the world and concluded that all improving systems (and schools) use a similar set of interventions at a similar stage in their development. They went on to identify the sets of interventions needed for a poor system to become good, and for a fair to good system to move from good to great and then on to excellent. They strongly argue that the context determines how you do things, not what you do.

We tested this hypothesis, and explored what the UK system can learn, at the recent Inspirational Schools Partnership network event in London where we worked with Sir Michael Barber of the McKinsey group and colleagues from the ISOS partnership. Together we identified the following responses to a number of key questions.

What is the most significant message for school leaders?

Here delegates stressed the importance of leadership selection and development, the importance of school leaders understanding high-quality teaching and learning, driving it, and in terms of ‘hows’, ensuring consistency across the school. The need to focus on the core purpose and learning in the classroom and the relationship between teacher and student emerged as a key priority, as did an unrelenting focus on achievement and the impact of what we do. This was expressed as seeing a shared and consistent focus to raise attainment in the context of collective capacity, rather than something that was ‘done to’ the school. It was also seen as something that needed to be benchmarked and judged against worldwide standards. There was also a recognition of the need for continuous training for both new and existing staff, so all knew and understood what ‘excellent’ looks like ‘round here’, with a well thought-out process of how to get there.

What is the most significant message for my local system?

What is the most significant message for national policymakers?

Here colleagues stressed that change should be driven by school leaders who understand local issues and who will provide solutions in collaboration across an area. They felt that school-to-school support needs clarity of thinking locally, because it won’t ‘just happen’, and this raises the question of how it can be professionalised and taken to a new level. Colleagues placed a high value on CPD; Teaching Schools may provide a framework but this is just a beginning of this process. We mustn’t underestimate the impact of the dramatic change in terms of role and funding of what is now the middle tier of the local authorities and the fact that local work was until recently funded from the National Strategies and other targeted funding. In effect this appeared to be free or heavily subsidised for schools.

This raises the important question of incentivising the generality of schools to take their next steps forward. Delegates highlighted the need to provide resources to develop capacity with appropriate targeting, and invest in networks that will have a positive impact on teaching and learning. We are in the process of moving from fully funded (or seemingly free) provision to a market where schools pay and choose. This is a big leap at a time of reductions in funding. The system needs to support school in making this transition, and an earmarked or suggested funding allocation of the percentage a school needs to spend on buying in professional development could be a very simple way of helping schools, school leaders and governors in making that provision. Finally, the question of the need for

quality assurance of providers and a place to go so you can know what available and how it is regarded was viewed as becoming increasingly important.

Conclusions and actions

A key lesson is that, in these new and changed circumstances, there is an agenda to be seized and we do know what needs to be done. It is also clear that in a more diverse system there will no longer be one solution for the system but a range of solutions and ways of achieving our goals. This is in the end something we should celebrate, as a ‘one size fits all’ set of answers are rarely good answers. Further, the clearest lesson of all in the McKinsey research is that greater informed professionalism and creativity are needed if our ‘good and improving’ system is to take its next steps. Top-down solutions are reasonably good at raising the floor but they are less good at raising the ceiling.

The Inspirational Schools Partnership and its founding group of head teachers have committed to responding to the agenda and applying the lessons of the McKinsey report, and is launching its ‘Good to Great’ programme this September. It accepts that schools will need to make a choice for themselves and that they will need to invest in this agenda if they want to move forward. It recognises that there is a gap in provision and it is one where we can offer one option and way of helping schools ‘mind that gap’ in the new environment. The solutions lie in our hands and we are inviting schools to join us and together create a solution to what we do next and how to help the system take its next steps forward for students, teachers and the whole school – by, in Ben Levin’s words, “combining vision, optimism and realism” and through an absolute commitment to our moral purpose and a shared belief in our young people.

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